

## JS to be further marginalised?

### A recipe for weaker democracy

THE government is planning to extend the intervening period between two parliament sessions from 60 to 90 days. If the move is taken, it will push the already dormant parliament into a state of further hibernation with fewer sessions in a year.

At a time when there should be redoubled efforts to bring parliament to life, steps seem to be contemplated to further weaken it. We understand that the government has no control over the opposition boycott -- seen as exerting the most benumbing influence on the parliamentary proceedings. But the government has also failed to manage its own house -- a point made clear by the lack of quorum in parliament sessions. Similarly, the parliamentary standing committees are not working regularly.

We believe the plan to increase the time between two sessions to 90 days is a blatant attempt to undermine functioning of parliament. We have to bear in mind that in the presence of a powerful executive branch of the government, the parliament plays a pivotal role in ensuring transparency and accountability.

Its seems the whole plan is based on the erroneous concept that fewer working days at the parliament will give the lawmakers more time to concentrate on development activities in their constituencies. Here we would like to point out that MPs are elected to parliament to work there as people's representatives. They should have no direct role in development works that are supposed to be undertaken and supervised by the elected local government representatives. If the lawmakers are brought into the picture, there will be overlapping of duties.

The ruling party is wrongly focusing on the development functions of the MPs. By lessening the frequency of parliament sessions, the government will only institutionalise two very negative things. First, the emphasis on the MPs having a direct role in development might foster an antagonistic relationship between them and the local government representatives. Second, the primacy of parliament in a democracy will be given a short shrift.

Parliament as the centre-piece of popular sovereignty must have a fuller play with its sessions held every two months in the very least.

## Bomb blast cases

### When will these be solved?

DURING the last 27 months of the four-party alliance rule, there have been at least five bomb blasts in different parts of the country. Though the investigations began with some aplomb, these tended to peter out down the road, finally disappearing into wilderness. Apart from collecting bits and pieces of evidence from the spots, doing some preliminary investigation and in the case of only one blasts, arresting one suspect, nothing really happened in the end. The blasts and the perpetrators behind them remain a mystery.

Police officials have cited certain reasons for lack of progress in the investigation, such as, frequent transfer of investigation officers, delay in giving reports about forensic evidence, lack of required equipment to examine bomb blasts etc. But the most shocking reasons they mentioned would shed ample light on the principle cause of the delay. It's the political influence. Whenever the investigation officers tried to get to the bottom of these incidents, political influence peddling, both in the past and the present, put spanner on the wheel. It prevented them doing their job in a professional manner. That probably explains why none of the bomb blast cases have so far been solved. Not just the failure to submit charge sheets, in almost all the cases, the real culprits have not been tracked down. The authorities have a lot of explaining to do, if they want to put our minds in rest. It is undoubtedly worrying to learn about the sad state of these cases. The authorities must ensure transparency in these cases, and make sure that politics does not comes in the way of investigation.

We have been watching with anxiety the recent discoveries of huge caches of arms and other explosives from around the country. As the police officials say, the materials used in the bombs are highly sophisticated. Discovering such huge caches will be meaningless unless the routes of trafficking these illegal materials are identified and sealed. At the same time, a culture of impunity has been creeping in since the real culprits are not being punished. We must not allow that to happen any longer.

# Democratisation through decentralisation

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

ON decentralisation, Bangladesh has an "on again, off again" history. The country first witnessed the taste of decentralisation in 1975 in the form of administrative reform surrounding the *Zila* (district) administration (governorship). This was short lived due to the political turmoil after the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975.

The next wave of decentralisation hit during President Zia ur Rahman's regime between 1976 and 1981. He was keen to introduce a grassroots administration at the village level called *Gram Sarkar* (village government). This attempt was also ceased to operate after Zia was killed in a military coup in 1981.

The third attempt of decentralising Bangladesh's administration was made by President HM Ershad by introducing an elected administration at the *Upazila* (sub-district) level in 1985. The subsequent elected government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia dissolved this system in 1991.

It appears that, at least three genuine attempts on decentralisation were reversed in the last quarter of a century. The introduction and reversal of decentralisation policies inflicted huge drain to the public funds without bringing any change at the local level administration since the independence. This has been a major mark of failure and wastage of scarce resources during various military and elected regimes over the last thirty years.

**Decentralisation Bill under 7th Parliament (1996-2001):** The Local Government Reform Commission submitted a report to the government in May 1997. The government subsequently passed a legislation to hold elections for the *Upazila Parishad* (sub-district level) and also a bill was passed by the Parliament on establishing *Zila Parishad* (district level). The government of Sheikh Hasina pledged to implement elected local government bodies at all four

levels: *Gram* (village), Union (currently in place), *Upazila* and *Zila*. While one can understand her government's eagerness to decentralise, but to introduce reforms at four levels in one term was by far an ambitious task, particularly, without having adequate resources and without forming any political consensus on the agenda. At the end, in the life of the 7th Parliament, nothing was implemented due to lack of cooperation from then opposition.

The manifestos of two major parties (AL and BNP) for the 2001 general election have given decentralisation issue a priority agenda. The AL pledged again that the administrative decentralisation in the future was going to be

course, would be a premature attempt now to make any evaluation of the programme. However, one cannot hold a genuine hope on the success of this plan after knowing what is coming up in the media over the last few months. Moreover, the government has unilaterally implemented the programme with having no political consensus. As a result, this also seems destined to a failure with risking, once again, huge amount of public funds being going into drain. What is desired of a democratic government?

**Devolution**

To develop a decentralisation strategy for Bangladesh one must first look at the country's ability to

fund a reform programme which is likely to attain a meaningful and sustainable outcome. In the past so much money has gone into drain in the name of decentralisation that the nation is not prepared to see this repeated again. A sustainable and practical strategy must be devised by keeping the following outcomes in mind (put forward by the World Development Report 1999): 1) devolution and transfer of power from a centralised to a decentralised administration; 2) devising appropriate functions and resources for a decentralised administration; 3) developing electoral rules and accountability measures for decentralisation; and, 4) drawing an appropriate management plan for decentralised governance.

It is expected that a meaningful devolution and transfer of power from the centre can proceed smoothly if *Zila* and *Upazila Parishads* are established in phases. One must remember that the major objective of the decentralised governance is to relieve the centre from governing

How to seek a way out of the present stalemate? It needs an immediate suspension of the MPs' role in development works. This is a major source of obstacle in reaching a consensus for a genuine decentralisation process to begin (recent squabble on holding Upazila election in the cabinet immediately comes to mind). If the MPs settle with legislative roles only, the politics can be re-established as politics of nation-building and mass welfare.

mentioned above can be realised without any difficulty. Is devolution then a wishful thinking or a genuine way forward?

**Democratisation**

The present political environment cannot be regarded as democracy friendly. The main ruling party (BNP) is in turmoil and the former President (Prof. B Chowdhury) is finally testing the political water after a few months in the wilderness. Once again, Bangladesh's twelve and a half years of political journey with virtually non-functional parliamentary democracy, is stepping into another uncertain future. Why?

The uncertainty began immediately after the last general election (1 October 2001) which was held on a new premise and was not seen before. Let us explain it more clearly. Former US President Bill Clinton paid a state visit to Bangladesh in March 2000. During this visit the Clinton administration branded Bangladesh as a Moderate Muslim Democracy (MMD). Conceptu-

groups to win the general election. The strategy worked and the BNP formed a government with an alliance of fundamentalist religious parties after the 2001 general election. This transformed Bangladesh's liberal democracy, inadvertently or otherwise, into an MMD.

However, with too many non-liberal features in place, indeed, thinking of decentralisation or devolution now is certainly wishful. Is there any way out?

**Conclusion**

Given the outcome of a parliamentary democracy over the sixth, seventh and current parliament, it is difficult, if not impossible to find an answer. The path for economic development looks long and hazardous for Bangladesh. The take-off to full economic development has been delayed due to severe turbulence in terms of deteriorating law and order, uncontrolled corruption and political uncertainty, brought about by the unceasing political confrontation and turmoil. Moreover, some politicians and

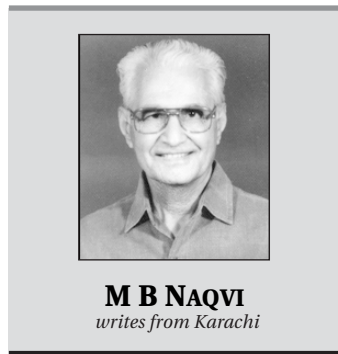
their cronies have been blamed for creating turbulence in the economic front by plundering national wealth over the last quarter of a century. It may be true that a handful of criminals and their aids have been taking part in creating the present polluted socio-economic-political environment, but at the end it rests with the politicians, particularly, with the supreme leaders of both government and opposition parties to provide a solution.

To bring back a genuine liberal democratisation process, the society is least interested to live any more with politicising the destiny of the masses. Many, however, believe that it would take a miracle to change the present political mindset to fix the suffocation that currently exists in the country. Confrontation still makes the call for the politicians' day and it is growing by the hour, by the day and by the week. Bangladesh's destiny is now certainly rests with the two leaders: the PM and the Opposition Leader, to say the least. However, the so-called 'third' force is likely to be a formidable challenge soon. With this prospect, the present environment would not last long in a so-called 'political hot bed' such as Bangladesh.

Finally, how to seek a way out of the present stalemate? It needs an immediate suspension of the MPs' role in development works. This seems to be the centre of all the sources of deals, pilferage and corruption in the society. This is also the major source of obstacle in reaching a consensus for a genuine decentralisation process to begin (recent squabble on holding Upazila election in the cabinet immediately comes to mind). If the MPs settle with legislative roles only, the politics can be re-established as politics of nation-building and mass welfare. If the politicians fail to show any way out, certainly people power will do. That is what the lesson the history provides.

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## A policy toward India, please



M B NAQVI  
writes from Karachi

IT is high time, after 56 years, that Pakistanis defined their permanent purposes and interests vis-à-vis India. Pakistan's relations with India have so far been driven by an adversarial attitude and the vicissitudes of the Kashmir dispute. Following Kargil operations and 2002 grand confrontation, Islamabad has been desperate about the resumption of dialogue with New Delhi. This has been a second U turn in policy; hitherto, the Kashmir policy was premised on Jihad in the disputed areas forcing India into an acceptable settlement. This has been given up. Politically, it is a big price paid by a military-sponsored regime for resumption of dialogue.

Many questions arise. If only the great strategists in Islamabad could read the situation aright, they should have found it logical to turnaround the Kashmir policy as soon as they were forced into changing their policy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan. It was necessary to re-assess the nature of US' relations with India -- and Pakistan -- by trying to understand the larger American strategic needs in Asia. Was there any understanding of the changes and commonalities in the American strategy between the Bush and Clinton governments before the famous "either with us or against us" telephone call? It is doubtful. Far too many Pakistanis simply thought that a Republican Administration was pro-Pakistan and a Democratic one was pro-India. There is however much

more to American foreign policy than such simplistic notions.

The US strategy now seeks to make India a strategic partner, the way Japan and Britain are. With Pakistan, the US relationship is cynical flirtation or worse; it is all too temporary, if only Islamabad can see clearly. Pakistan's India policy has been flawed: that there is no military solution to the Kashmir imbroglio is a conclusion that was arrived at after 1965 and 1971 wars, though for a time only. As soon as Pakistan acquired the atomic

was Pakistan-sponsored; Taliban's campaign against Afghanistan will be greatly handicapped and reduced.

The second major concession is agreeing to SAFTA (South Asian Free Trade Agreement). If it is implemented fully and in its true spirit, it will set off a great expansion of trade in the region, especially if the SAARC goes ahead and makes SAPTA (the proposed South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement) also legally binding and fully operative. That will

paradigm. What new paradigm has been adopted cannot be answered categorically. It is possible, may be even likely, that this or future governments may not be able to pursue the new paradigm wholeheartedly, the outlines of which are not too difficult to see. But it would be proper if we try and visualise some of the more important features of the new paradigm. Once the old paradigm about Kashmir and the consequent adversarial relations with India has been given up, as has actually happened, it is necessary to replace

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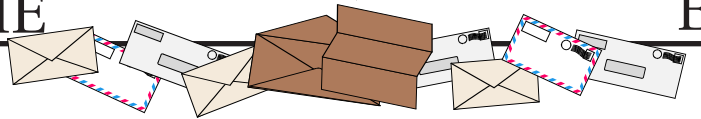
economic cooperation in South Asia can only be to sustain higher rates of economic growth in all SAARC member states. A single market and closer internal cooperation can make for rapid economic development of all. The pathway to progress lies through regional integration and the region's integration with Asia's and Europe's other regions through better communications to sustain large-scale intercontinental trade. Pakistan being at the tri-junction of West, South and Central Asian regions, can benefit greatly from overland trade -- in addition to the benefits it shall have of much improved transportation facilities.

What it boils down to is to show India the benefits of friendship with Pakistan. One benefit would be common: economic advancement and more wealth creation, if SAFTA, SAPTA and other following steps of economic cooperation are taken and more wealth is created. There will be all round enrichment and India's share will not be less than those of other member states; in fact it will be more. But since all will benefit, that does not matter.

The second major benefit that can accrue to all is cultural enrichment through cultural exchanges and free movement of the people. These should be the major objectives for Pakistan's policy-making in future. In this connection, the importance of free travel, preferably visa free throughout the region, at some stage in future, will be necessary. It will intensify economic cooperation among the member states of SAARC as well as cement the bonds of friendship between Pakistan and India, without ignoring the Bangladesh and other people. Both cultural enrichment and economic progress would be needed for stable peace and for enhancement of regional security.

M B Naqvi is a leading columnist in Pakistan.

## TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR



Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

### Retirement age

Is it actually inevitable to enhance retirement age to 60 years where our country is burdened with joblessness? So far I understand the proposal has come up on the issue of extension of services of some government officials. I see the extension of services of some government officials is as more of a political decision than of state necessity. If the country could not run sans services of some officials than how could the country run after the expiry of extended services of those so-called indispensable officials.

Our policy makers should look at the non-government organisations, multinational companies and most of the private banks, which are being maintained successfully by the young officials.

To ease the problem of joblessness, retirement age should rather be 55 years.

**Habibul Muhit**  
*Chittagong*

### Democracy at stake

Bangladesh is practising democracy since 1991. Our democracy is nascent

and vulnerable. We know the parliamentary standing committees are the cornerstone of parliamentary democracy, but in our country the parliamentary bodies do not meet regularly and they do not perform their duties. Opposition's walkout and the quorum crisis are common features of the *Jatiya Sangsad*. To boost democratic norms, opposition's participation is

essential. The speaker can play a pivotal role to get things back to track.

The government should materialise the recommendations of parliamentary standing committees on a priority basis. So the political mindset should be harmonised and the electoral system modernised, if we want to establish democracy in the true sense of the term.

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### Scientists abroad

The science and ICT minister's call to expatriate Bangladeshi scientists to come back to the country is as unrealistic as the order of that ministry for submitting monthly

progress report of research work by scientists, particularly that of Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC). The order of the ministry is not reasonable for it is not clear whether the persons who will peruse the reports have enough expertise to judge the merits and demerits of the report prepared by a physicist, chemist, biochemist, microbiologist, botanist or a zoologist. Since it is possible to prepare a report without doing any research, will they be able to detect the weaknesses of a report? The most disappointing sign is that no senior scientist tried to make the ministry understand that its plan is not feasible.

The call of the minister is not realistic because the existing scientists, particularly the youngsters are desperate to leave Bangladesh due to lack of a

research environment. The other problems include lengthy and faulty procurement process, lack of alternate power source, backlog in promotion, lack of access to internet and telecommunication and appointment of non-scientist chairman of the BAEC that opened the door of the organisation's doom like the BCSIR. So before calling the expatriate scientists back home, the ministry should make some revolutionary change so that the existing scientists feel secure to stay in the country; new meritorious graduates find interest in joining government research institutes. Why the expatriate scientists will come back to Bangladesh? To be disconnected from 24-hour free internet access and phone, power supply? These are the minimum facilities that the scientists will be deprived of if they

come back. Other facilities deserve no mention. Take the necessary steps to retain the existing scientists in Bangladesh, then try to bring the expatriates back home.

**Ayoung scientist**  
*Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission.*

### Politics and modern life

The single greatest factor standing in the way of the rapid development of Bangladesh is the mindset of our politicians. A negative political culture has been allowed to develop which is alienating the masses from the political masters. Why? The followers wish to be masters!

The genuine public opinion has no leverage because the so-called

intellectuals, the thinkers of the society, are politically polarised and do not have the moral courage to stand alone and neutral.

The herd-instinct is a common factor in the emerging smaller nations, leading to parochialism and tribalism. Self-preservation comes first, and the party is used as a channel or stepping stone for further consolidation of personal and individual security and to ensure interests. That was perhaps the reason why traditional politics in the UK was based on the *zamindars* or landlords (the House of Lords). Today politics is used to earn a decent living.

In the developing countries, the middle class is the thinking backbone of a nation, because the rich are too rich and alienated from the poorer masses (great commu-

nication gap between the rural masses and the urban elite). This is the left-over from the *zamindari* days--the feudal system.

The NGO's came into the picture with their social field services, and in Bangladesh also, these agencies have contributed to the development of the rural society (the success of the micro credit programme is now universally recognised).

However, the political parties who rule the country through elected representatives, have deviated from the right path and goals, as the fast-changing world is based on materialistic prosperity.

**Abdali**  
*Dhaka.*